M-2009

RAISING THE 'EMPLOYABILITY QUOTIENT' OF A GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED LEARNER POPULATION THROUGH A FLEXIBLE AND MODULAR EMPLOYABLE SKILLS TRAINING CURRICULUM

Neeta Kapai, IGNOU, India

Summary

In the present age of lifelong learning, providing education may not be an end in itself, but providing employment opportunities can nevertheless be the light at the end of the tunnel. For prospective job aspirants who have been enrolled in an ODL technical or professional academic programme at Indira Gandhi National Open University, the long and arduous scholastic journey can lead to gainful employment provided we expose them to a curriculum that integrates and incorporates industry-benchmarked competency and skill enhancement features, involving training interventions for mandatory sets of generic skills to make them employable. We have piloted our initiative for enhancing the employability quotient of a heterogeneous and geographically dispersed learner population enrolled for IT and non-IT programmes across nine Regional Centres through a two-day workshop. Detailed profiling of students (4,365) through structured questionnaires was carried out. Skill-gap analysis through industry-endorsed test analysis has greatly benefited learners in reflecting upon their core strengths for leveraging and bridging the skill gaps by voluntarily opting for the customized skill training interventions. Job fairs conducted after training have led to successful placements and short- listing of our learners, upholding the benefits of training interventions.

INTRODUCTION

For any society, the ability to produce, select, adopt, commercialize and use its knowledge is critical for sustained economic growth and for improving the living standards of its people. Knowledge has become the most important factor governing economic development. (World Bank 2002) Today, it is very clear that knowledge is the raw material that will drive the development of nations for the foreseeable future.

No country has been able to achieve constant and sustainable economic development without substantial investment in its human capital. The development of human capital/capacity-building is an investment rather than a cost. Knowledge, skills and competences provide individuals with productive capacities and, therefore, educated and trained workers are the key enablers of economic growth (USAID, 2008: 26). Capacity-building strategies need to be closely aligned to the dynamic needs of our rapidly changing job market, driving home the point that workforce development and economic growth are

interdependent and parallel processes since sustained growth of an organization can occur only if its human capital possesses the competitive edge to remain in tandem with the demands of the current market through a process of continuous up-skilling and re-skilling to enhance their capabilities for becoming employable.

The development and accumulation of human capital for employability require some investment in the form of industry-compliant training interventions. However, unfortunately, this key understanding does not fall within the purview of the conventional academic curriculum in India, be it in traditional universities (full-time), or professional or technical institutes, much less the open and distance education system. Both the educational systems place the major stress on scholastic inputs without emphasizing the need for developing a national academic framework that promotes 'Education for employability'. We subscribe to the definition of 'employability' as a person's capability to gain initial employment, maintain this employment, and obtain new employment if required (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Overall, the employability of an individual is about moving self-sufficiently within the labour market, the key determinants being individuals' knowledge, skills and attitudes and the way they use these assets to present themselves to their employers. Put very succinctly, employability is the capacity and capability of gaining and maintaining productive work over the period of one's working life (Muhammad Nawaz Qaisar, MS HRD, NUML, Islamabad, Pakistan).

Our present study is an attempt to enhance the employability of our learners subsequent to receiving feedback reports from job-providers/recruiters that our academically well-grounded and updated students pursuing IT and non-IT programmes lacked appropriate communication skills – information which would require intervention to enable them to compete with full-time students from traditional colleges and institutions to gain suitable jobs in the labour market.

For this purpose, we have developed and piloted multifaceted capacity-building strategies in a phased manner. The first phase involves career counselling and guidance across industry domains and job levels in addition to creating awareness of the need for mandatory employable skills for becoming ready for jobs through a one-day workshop that virtually gives our students 'a ringside view' of the key features of our enhancement model, its duration and payment structure. The second phase of the study subjects these sensitized job aspirants to a customized modular training curriculum which is preceded and succeeded by skill-gap analysis, mapped against industry-benchmarked assessments for final certification of employability. Both the phases culminate in job fairs. Extensive candidate profiling was done on key parameters prior to the commencement of the study. At the end of phase one, we faced an unforeseen paradoxical situation. The candidates who required our assistance for up-skilling themselves were the ones who could not afford to pay the training fees required for phase two, and so they would continue to remain unemployable. In contrast, economically comfortable students possessed employable skills and were therefore capable of gaining suitable job opportunities during the job fairs without our assistance.

Broad recommendations

To overcome and offset this unfortunate situation, the present study recommends the embedding/ integrating of an employable skill enhancement scheme into the general curriculum of all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, starting from the first year of the three-year degree and with the training fees consolidated into the programme fees. This would ensure a share of the fees would go to the training vendors, which in turn would reduce the training cost due to economies of scale resulting in a 'win-win' situation for all the stakeholders; and with this 'education for employability model', the university would be able to provide a continuous and steady pipeline of job-ready and billable candidates to industry. This will also put to rest the apprehensions in the mind of recruiters who were earlier

reluctant to hire ODL students since this initiative will showcase our learners as being second to none.

OBJECTIVES

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has been a one-stop academic destination for a dispersed learner population since its inception in 1985, duly established through an act of parliament. Since then, it has been the preferred choice of the masses due to its flexibility and ability to provide equitable access to quality learning resources which incorporate technology to break geographical barriers to 'reach the unreached'.

In 2005, an ambitious, needs-based and challenging initiative called the 'Campus Placement Cell' (CPC) was established to assist ODL learners overcome some of the barriers and bottlenecks faced while seeking employment opportunities with certain organizations. For a student, the Placement Cell forms a crucial interface between successful completion of an academic journey and entry into the professional job world. For the University, the Placement Cell forms an integral part of its organizational structure, since it provides an interactive platform for its students to meet up with potential employers to find out about appropriate jobs that are commensurate with their personal profiles. The launching of the Campus Placement Cell in 2005 was therefore an attempt to involve stakeholders in education and industry in equipping IGNOU students with employable skills to enable them to become self-reliant.

The objective of the current study is to introduce the philosophy and practice of 'Education for employability' and to utilize it as a much-needed intervention to:

• assist our learners in developing their personal qualities, skills, knowledge, understanding and
  attitudes so that they acquire a strong foundation for lifelong learning;

• raise their 'employability quotient' to help them find jobs that are commensurate with their personal profiles, aptitudes, aspirations; and

• assist them to remain productive even in a rapidly changing economic environment.

Through this initiative, we intend to develop and project a public image of a world-class educational institution that cares for the end objectives of its students. We want to prepare today's students for tomorrow's challenges by equipping them with 21st century employable skills.

OUR APPROACH

Our strategy for achieving the objective of facilitating and enhancing employability involved four broad steps achieved in two phases, viz.

1. the creation of an exhaustive database of region-wide and programme-wide students;
2. the identification of a suitable target group for the study;
3. detailed candidate profiling through a structured questionnaire survey;
4. a Transition Services Model; and
5. a Capacity-building Model.

Steps 1–3 helped us in identifying our target group for piloting both the models in a phased manner. Our target group was 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate and postgraduate students pursuing BA, BCOM, BSC, BSW, BCA, MBA and MCA programmes at 21 Regional Centre cities.

The responses elicited to two sets of structured questionnaire are illustrated below:

During phase 1 of the project, we piloted steps 4 and 5 above, the details and key features of which are as follows:

Step 4: Essence and paradigm of the Transition Services Model.

Talent identification was done through 'employable skill assessments' followed by talent absorption conducted through a job fair.

Steps involved in the Transition Services model

(A) Pre-hiring activities

1. Candidates were informed through various channels about upcoming job fairs at different locations.
2. Interested candidates sent their resumes for profiling and short-listing.
3. The demand generated by the hiring company on the basis of short-listings was assessed. 4. Short-listed candidates were invited for hiring through prior intimation.

(B) Hiring-day activities

1. Needs analysis of candidates either face-to-face or through a structured proforma/questionnaire
2. Counselling and skill assessments/competency mapping of candidates
3. Process: analysis of results and categorizing them into 'readily employable' and 'readily trainable' groups
4. 'Readily employable' candidates sent to a maximum of two interviews and GD rounds, and the
   'trainable' given further counselling and guidance and advised to undergo the 'Employable Skill Training' programme
5. Offer letters handed to successful candidates.

Roles/responsibilities of IGNOU

Prior to the hiring activity

1. Disseminate relevant information pertaining to all hiring and capacity-building events sufficiently well in advance to give an optimum response time for interested and eligible candidates.
2. Filter off undesirable candidates based on eligibility criteria provided by the hiring company.
3. Inform and invite screened applicants to the hiring event on a date and at a location which is mutually convenient

Perennial role (hand-holding)

1. Provide career counselling guidance and updated advice on job scenarios through seminars and presentations by industry experts
2. Sensitize all learners to the continuous need to be skilled, re-skilled and up-skilled for bridging skill gaps in line with industry mandates through workshops and field visits

3. Provide opportunities to undergo modular training in employable skills.

Role/ responsibilities of partner institutes

Prior to hiring activity

1. Provide clear-cut eligibility criteria/qualification for inviting applications/resumes for the jobs   on offer (candidate profile)
a.2.   Create/generate demand for jobs based on the available talent pool identified through face-to-   face interviews and candidate resume profiling.

During hiring activity

1. Conduct hiring at targeted locations on mutually convenient dates/times.
2. Tag candidates through unique candidate IDs for assessment, counselling, interview scheduling and   follow-up for future placements.

Post-hiring activity

1. Provide fortnightly feedback on placements along with statistical analysis.
2. Offer candidates interface services through team lease channels.

Step 5: Essence and paradigm of the Capacity Building Model

Talent identification, transformation and absorption through tie-ups with staffing companies for conducting the job fair**.**

Pre-workshop activities

1. Candidates informed in various ways about the proposed workshop at different locations
2. Interested candidates send their resumes for profiling and short-listing
3. Screening and filtering of applications to have a homogenous and uniformly sincere target group.
3. Short-listed candidates informed to register and attend the workshop
4. Training and assessment companies informed of the batch size (based on the responses) at the different locations, to enable them to organize their trainers, assessors and the supporting material for the specified numbers
5. Regional Centres informed about the activity so that suitable logistical support is arranged.

RESULTS

(A) Through the series of one-day workshops conducted at all major high enrolment centres across   the country, we were able to:

1. sensitize our heterogeneously profiled and distributed job-aspiring learners to the necessity of becoming professionally skilled and competent to be transformed into effective and productive human resources;
2. provide our learners with an effective and perfect ecosystem that closely simulated the competency-building initiative aimed at enhancing employability;

3. understand and assess the 'on-the-ground' capabilities of our EOI shortlisted vendors along with other vendors for undertaking the long-term and continuous capacity-building/employable skill enhancement initiatives of the University.

(B) Through both the above models operated strategically through workshops, we were able to enable   our learners to:

- get an insight into all the key factors governing successful placements;
- understand that progress is possible only through hard work, commitment and out-of-the-box thinking;
- become sensitized to the ingredients essential for all-round personality development, such as ambition, goal-setting, persistence, motivation, interpersonal skills, leadership qualities and integrity;
- understand their strengths for leveraging as well as identify their weaknesses for bridging the gaps;
- develop the zeal to excel in their chosen fields by upgrading and updating their employable skills;
- inspire their peers to aspire through group exposure to real-life situations and role play;
- transform challenges into opportunities by becoming determined, distinct and driven.

(C)   Our questionnaire for **candidate profiling** elicited the responses tabulated below

Table 1: Results of candidate profiling

Parameters	RCs North 7 cities	RCs South 4 cities	RCs East 4 cities	RCs West 4 cities	RCs NEP 1 city
Age bracket	21–38 years	25–32 years	33 years	26years	35–39 years
Programme	UG and PG	UG and PG	UG and PG	UG and PG	UG and PG
Years taken to complete degree	50% in 3 years	55% in 4 years	50% in 4 years	60% in 3 years	70% in years
% employed prior to joining IGNOU	39–48%	23–31%	23–31%	48–66%	10%
% getting jobs after IGNOU degree	34–67%	39–48%	10%	48–66%	50%
Channels used to procure jobs	Job portal and newspaper ads; walk-in	Job consultant, competitive tests; job portal	Walk-in, newspaper	Newspaper; walk-in; job portal	Newspaper

Compelling reasons for job change	Underpaid (15%) transferable	Underutilized (13%); not challenging enough	Job not Challenging	Job atmosphere not good	Fight with boss; stagnation
% questioned on recognition of ODL degree	30% Yes	40% Not	5% Sometimes	3% not applied	Not applied
% facing discrimination while seeking jobs	40% Yes	40% Not	5% Yes	5% Yes	Not applied
% feel underprivileged and less accomplished	60% Yes	50% Yes	20% Yes	25% Yes	60%No
Skills critical for employability.	Spoken English and personal grooming	Resume writing and analytical skills	Email etiquette, GD and personal interview	Resume writing and analytical skills	GD and interview
% who can afford soft skill training	20% yes	40% yes	36% Yes	60% yes	^5: yes
% benefited from career counselling	43%	61%	89%	65%	92%
%benefit from capacity-- building workshops	53%	56%	70%	60%	84%
% benefit from transition services model	50%	66%	70%	48%	54%

CONCLUSION

The current mainstay of every industry domain and job vertical is undoubtedly relevant knowledge and academic excellence together with a judicious blend of continuous conscious effort to up-skill and re-skill oneself in order concur with the mandatory requirements of the desired service industry.

In addition, candidates with cross-functional skills are very well regarded by all potential employers**.**

An increasing number of private sector organizations have realized that it is the employability of the candidates that matters, not their qualifications, when it comes to real business. We have attempted to create awareness of this need amongst our student population and the university authorities, and have made recommendations about how to remain in the forefront

on employability issues and concerns. Job fairs have seen considerable success in terms of job conversion after capacity-building measures.